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ABSTRACT

Procedures to map the broad outline of student interaction with various help-giving persons and campus agencies were investigated. A sample of 633 undergraduate students completed an 8-part problem-solving questionnaire that identified current problems, problems that previously existed, the 5 most important problems, improvement rates for the most important problems, and sources of assistance in problem resolution. The most frequently reported problem was connected with the academic side of life: academic concerns, fear about achievement, lack of time, study skills, trouble getting going on things, vocational choice, and career planning. Personal problems such as lack of privacy, depression, and unhappiness also were common. Overall, students reported that 43 percent of their most important problems had improved. In the majority of cases, student reported using nothing or no source to solve their problems. When resources were used, friends ranked first, followed by parents and then several university services. There was a mean reported improvement rate of 20 percent for those cases where no source was used, while the use of all other sources recorded a mean improvement rate of 66 percent. The most common problem brought to the counseling service was vocational choice and career planning, followed by selecting a major. It is concluded that it is particularly in the areas of personal, social, and environmental or institutional problems that students appear to fail to take advantage of the help that exists. Students turned primarily to friends and family even for many academic and vocational problems. (SW)

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Student Interaction with Campus Help-Givers: Mapping the Network's Efficacy

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Assessing the needs and problems of constituent groups as a preliminary step to modification of the system to meet those needs arose as a critical issue during the 1970's (Banning & Kaiser, 1974). However, only meagre attention has been paid to understanding the existing help-giving networks of a campus: not only what problems exist, but where students go for help with various problems, and with what success.

The present study was a preliminary investigation of procedures designed to map the broad outline of student interaction with various help-giving persons and campus agencies. It's purpose was to establish the existence of current patterns and to evaluate the perceived effectiveness of such patterns, agencies and persons; more importantly, it's purpose was to develop a procedure for such analysis.

The sample of 633 students was obtained through a quasi-random stratification procedure. Participation and return rates approximated 100% and the sample was generally representative of the undergraduate population of the university. An eight part Problem Solving Questionnaire identified current problems, problems which had previously existed, the five most important problems experienced, problem improvement and sources of help.

The most frequently reported problems tended to be connected with the academic side of life: academic concerns, fear about achievement, lack of time, study skills, trouble getting going on things, vocational choice and career planning. Personal problems such as lack of privacy, depression, unhappiness, etc. also were common. From among a list of 71 potential problems a mean of 7.89 were reported as current problems, while 15.32 were reported as problems "at some time."

Problem improvement was explored with the group of problems identified as most important problems (MIPs). Overall, students reported 43% of their MIPs had improved. The greatest percentage improvement occurred for the problems: trouble in your family (72%), suicidal feelings (75%), abortion (83%), emotional/psychological support (83%) and lack of control over feelings or behavior (80%). On the more pessimistic side, zero improvement rates were recorded for the problems of: autonomy, sexual outlet and recreational facilities. Among the 20 most commonly reported MIPs, the highest percentages of improvement occurred for: adjustment to college work (63%), depression (61%), vocational choice and career planning (56%), study skills (53%), and academic concerns (50%). Among the least frequently improved of these common MIPs were parking (14%), lack of time (17%), and not enough time for recreation (21%).

Students indicated what (if any) resources they had used for each of their MIPs. Overall, the most common response was to have used "nothing" or "no one " (57%). Following in frequency of use were: friends (43%), parents (12%), university counseling services (8%), "other sources" (8%), departmental faculty advisors (6%) and other faculty (5%).

The use of no source was found to be differential. That is, it was most frequently used (in dealing with the MIPs) for the problems of not enough time (85% of the cases), lack of time for recreation (84%), parking (83%), and trouble getting going on things (73%). No source was used least frequently for serious personal financial problems (26% of cases), vocational choice and career planning (28%), selecting a major (34%) and opposite sex relationships (34%).

Differentiating formally supplied university resources (such as the university counseling service or financial aids office) from more informal sources (such as friends), it was possible to further understand student use of resources. For example, 48% of students who reported vocational choice and career planning problems among their five MIPs, sought help from the institution, particularly from the Career Planning and Placement Center (18%) and advisors (22%); while only 20%

sought out informal sources. Similarly, formal resources were frequently sought out for the problems of selecting a major (38%), academic advising (44%), and serious personal financial problems (36%). By contrast, for depression, 55% of those reporting it as an MIP turned to informal sources such as parents or friends, while only 4% used formal institutional sources. For the majority of MIPs the use of no source or an informal source heavily outweighed the use of any formal campus resources.

There were substantial differences in the improvement reported for problems for which some resource had been sought and those for which no source had been sought. There was a mean reported improvement rate of 20% for those cases where "no source" was used. All other sources recorded a mean improvement rate of 66%. To highlight the cost of failing to use some external resource, the sample indicated that with this strategy only 6% of academic advising problems improved, 9% of parking problems, 10% of problems in relationships with the opposite sex. For each of these, other sources recorded improvement rates from 35% to 100%. In addition, while adjustment to college work improved a substantial 49% of the time when no source was used, friends received an improvement rate of 84% for this problem.

Spouses, other relatives, residence hall counselors, the learning center, religious organizations and personal counseling at the University Counseling Service all had improvement rates over 70%. Friends had an improvement rate of 69%. The University Counseling Service (all services) had an improvement rate of 64%, and the Student Health Center (medical and psychiatric) had an improvement rate of 65%.

Looking at the Counseling Service data more closely, the most common problem brought to the agency was vocational choice and career planning, followed by selecting a major. Thirty-seven problems were brought to the Counseling Service. Problem improvement varied from 0% (e.g., unhappy love affair, living arrangements) to 100% (e.g., conflicts over values, sexual problems, family troubles,

lack of time).

Surveying improvement rates for other problem x resource pairs revealed that friends were most helpful with: personal unhappiness (89% improvement rate), loneliness-isolation (82%), study skills (82%), and depression (87%). Faculty advisors were most helpful with vocational choice and career planning (71%) and selecting a major (72%) and were less helpful with academic advising (47%).

The use of no source was also differentially effective in resolving various problems. Using this approach, adjustment to college work had a reported improvement rate of 49% and anxiety had an improvement rate of 46%. However, improvement rates of only 6% were reported for problems related to academic advising, 9% for parking, 10% for opposite sex relationships and lack of time for recreation,, and 12% for assertiveness and not enough time.

Discussion

The current data confirm recent reports that the most frequent problems noted by college students are academic difficulties and career or major choice (Benedict, Apsler & Morrisson, 1977; Carney & Barak, 1976; Gallagher & Scheuring, 1978; Hummers & DeVolder, 1979), with other frequent problems including finances and negotiating the system (Carney & Barak, 1976) and a variety of personal problems (Benedict et al, 1977; Hummers & DeVolder, 1979; Houston, 1971; Snyder, Hill & Derksen, 1972).

In terms of help-seeking for these problems, the prominent use of no sources is of special concern given the cost it incurs in limiting problem resolution. Of particular concern are those students who may use this as a typical style of problem-solving. Such students probably constitute a high risk group not only for increased numbers of problems, but for other dysfunctions as well.

Data from this study present a somewhat stark picture of the institutional support received by students for troubles in the personal and emotional realm.

The university appears to do a better job in making available, accessible and appealing services associated with career choice, academic advising, major choice and other academic concerns. It is particularly in the areas of personal, social and environmental or institutional problems that students appear to fail to take advantage of the help that exists. Not only is the University Counseling Service underutilized in terms of getting help for appropriate problems, but so are other institutional resources such as residence hall counselors, the Student Health Center, and so on. Although these data are based on a somewhat limited sample, increased visibility and accessibility of campus resources seems called for, and this present study points out some specifics about where such work might begin.

The preference for help from a friend (or parent) when dealing with personal or social problems conforms to the pattern established by numerous other researchers (Snyder et al, 1972; Tyron, 1980). However, this present study also found that students turn primarily to friends and family even for many academic and vocational problems. In previous research students had indicated a preference for getting help in these areas from faculty or a university counseling center (e.g., Snyder et al, 1972).

The efficacy of spouses and other relatives supports literature which reports better mental health, increased longevity and increased happiness for those who are married or belong to an active social network (Berkman, 1977; Antonovsky, 1979). The comparatively lesser efficacy of institutional resources found in this study may be due to the fact that problems initially identified as more difficult are taken to institutional helpers or that problems resistant to informal help are eventually taken to more formal (trained) helpers. In any event, awareness of students' tendency to use friends and family (when available) and to find help therein, may indicate that efforts would be well spent on helping isolated students (including, perhaps, those who report the frequent use of "no sources") become more integrated with some supporting group. Lay or para-

professional helping skills training may also be appropriate for the general college population given the propensity of students to turn to their peers for help.

This study, perhaps most importantly, has outlined a metnodology that moves the campus psychologist from a task of merely cataloging current problems or reporting anticipated preferences for help-givers, to one of mapping student help-seeking patterns and evaluating the efficacy of the current system. The data generated allow the identification of under-used services or persons, and of here-to-for unknown resources; they facilitate the evaluation of student-perceived success and failure at different agencies or with different helpers and with various problems. Methodology such as this could constitute the initial step in a careful interactional analysis of student coping and resource utilization patterns. It could also facilitate the identification of those problems (including the lack of effective environmental resources) which are chronic, which show little improvement and which could therefore benefit from specific programming or environmental modification.

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